United Nations

Press Release

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FRIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

+ International Women's Day dedicated this year to refugee women, observed at United Nations Headquarters.

+ International Committee of the Red Cross receives two United States prisoners and 40 journalists released by Iraqi authorities in Baghdad.

+ Prince Sadruddin Aga Kahn asks to be relieved of present duties as Secretary-General's Personal Representative for humanitarian assistance relating to Iraq-Kuwait crisis.

+ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees appeals for $10 million to help Somali and Ethiopian refugees; also asks Italian authorities to allow Albanian refugees arriving by sea to land in Italy and be given help.

+ Commission on Status of Women ends session in Vienna adopting resolutions on international protection to refugee women, among other issues.

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The United Nations observed today as International Women's Day. The annual observance was this year dedicated to refugee women.

In a statement Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar called on the international community to redouble its efforts to provide protection and assistance for women refugees throughout the world. Noting that half of the world's 15 million refugees were women, he said those women were generally the victims of circumstances they did not control and of political decisions in which they did not participate. Nevertheless, he said, the burden to maintain their families economically, socially and culturally had fallen on them.

The Secretary-General emphasized that the focus today on refugee women -- a group of women who were among the least fortunate -- should encourage the international community to do its utmost to enable all women to enjoy equality, development and peace.

(more)

For information media—not an official record

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The International Committee of the Red Cross announced today that it had received two United States prisoners and 40 journalists who had been handed over by Iraqi authorities in Baghdad.

The Committee said the two prisoners were released into its care under an agreement reached yesterday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, providing for the repatriation of all prisoners of war and civilians detained in the Persian Gulf conflict.

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The Secretary-General's Spokesman today told correspondents that Sadruddin Aga Kahn had asked to be relieved of his present duties as Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar's Personal Representative for humanitarian assistance relating to the Iraq-Kuwait crisis.

The request was made following the meeting in New York on 28 February of United Nations agencies on humanitarian assistance to the Gulf area.

The spokesman said the Secretary-General hoped to be able to count on the cooperation of Sadruddin Aga Kahn in United Nations humanitarian activities in the follow-up to the mission to the region being undertaken by Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari, once Mr. Ahtisaari had presented his report to the Secretary-General.

It was stated that in addition to United Nations officials, the mission aircraft would be carrying over 20 tons of relief items to Iraq, in accordance with the decision taken yesterday by the Security Council's Sanctions Committee.

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Sadako Ogata, today launched an appeal for $10 million to help meet the urgent needs of 350,000 Somali refugees, as well as Ethiopian refugees who have returned to Ethiopia over the past two months.

In a communiqué, UNHCR reported that the situation had reached dramatic proportions and required particularly urgent attention on the part of the international community. The number of refugees and repatriates under its care in Ethiopia was now 1.2 million.

The UNHCR said further that the distribution of aid was hampered by the severe shortage of fuel in the country as a result of the Gulf crisis. It said efforts were now under way to obtain provisions of fuel and to hire lorries to obtain large quantities of water to be sent urgently to the affected regions.

(more)

In a separate development, UNHCR has reiterated its concern about any measures which could deny Albanian asylum-candidates access to refugee status in Italy. In a statement, the High Commissioner's Office said it had asked the Italian authorities to allow Albanians arriving by sea in reportedly precarious conditions to land in Italy and be given whatever help they needed. The Office said it had offered to work closely with the Italian Government to organize assistance and to help set up procedures to examine the eligibility of the Albanians for refugee status.

The UNHCR said that more than 11,000 Albanians had already arrived in Italy by sea.

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The Commission on the Status of Women ended its thirty-fifth session in Vienna today, hearing calls on the world community to extend international protection to refugee women. In a resolution adopted by consensus, the Commission asked Governments to implement measures that would ensure refugee women greater protection from physical violence, sexual abuse, abduction and circumstances that could force them into illegal activities.

Among other issues, the Commission also acted on measures related to the special needs of disabled women, and proposals to curb violence against women.

With the last day of the session coinciding with International Women's Day, the Director-General of the United Nations Office in Vienna, Margaret Anstee, said that as the Organization was striving to remove the causes that had forced refugee women to leave their homes, it would also endeavour to ensure that the measures which were taken reinforced the overall goals for the advancement of women.

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